

Employer's guide



Paths to parenthood: Uplifting new mothers at work

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Equality. It's about time.

Contents



About Totaljobs and the Fawcett Society	3
State of play: The number of working mothers is on the rise, but obstacles remain	4
Key findings	7
Barriers at the door: Returning after maternity leave	9
Tipping the scales: Juggling childcare with work	16
Family-friendly employers: How the right support benefits all	20
Recommendations:	
For championing new mothers at work	21
Solutions to support your people strategy	26
Final thoughts	27
Research methodology	29

About Totaljobs and the Fawcett Society



Totaljobs – part of The Stepstone Group

We are Totaljobs. We deliver the people you need to help your business grow and thrive.

As a global business with a local heart, we're proud to be part of The Stepstone Group. This makes us one of the world's leading hiring platforms, with a presence in over 30 countries.

Whether you want to attract and recruit brilliant people, sharpen your hiring strategies or build your market presence, we're here with precise and powerful solutions.

We are delighted to partner with the Fawcett Society on this crucial research. Their expertise has been invaluable in navigating these complex issues, and we're proud to join them in advocating for more family-friendly employment practices in the UK and beyond.

The Fawcett Society

The Fawcett Society is the UK's leading membership charity campaigning for gender equality and women's rights at work, at home and in public life. Our vision is a society in which women and girls in all their diversity are equal and truly free to fulfil their potential creating a stronger, happier, better future for us all.

We pride ourselves on our rigorous research and evidence-based insights in order to inform, shape and lead the debate on gender equality. Fawcett collaborates with partners from across business to drive forward our agenda-setting research and advance the status of women in the UK.

We offer our heartfelt thanks to our valued collaborators at Totaljobs, without whom this vital research would not have been possible.

Fawcett reserves all independence, and this report does not constitute an endorsement of Totaljobs or their products.



A note to the reader

We recognise and celebrate that parenthood can come in many shapes and sizes, transcending traditional relationship dynamics, and encompassing a wide spectrum of gender norms. Throughout this report we refer to 'mothers' as anyone taking maternity leave, and 'fathers' as those taking paternity leave (usually fathers, second carers or non-birthing partners). In this report, maternity and paternity leave also refers to elements of shared parental leave taken by either partner.

State of play: The number of working mothers is on the rise, but obstacles remain



Following our report on [Navigating fertility at work](#), the second in our 'Paths to parenthood' series sees us partner with the Fawcett Society once more, with a focus on the experiences of new mothers as they transition back to work after maternity leave.

While the 'new parent' phase is relatively short – and the saying goes that 'they grow up so fast' – as we will see, the impact of early motherhood follows a woman for the rest of her career, with particularly strong effects for Black and minoritised women, and single mothers.

These challenges primarily stem from inflexible workplaces and entrenched biases against mothers, further compounded by rising living costs and issues around the affordability and accessibility of childcare.

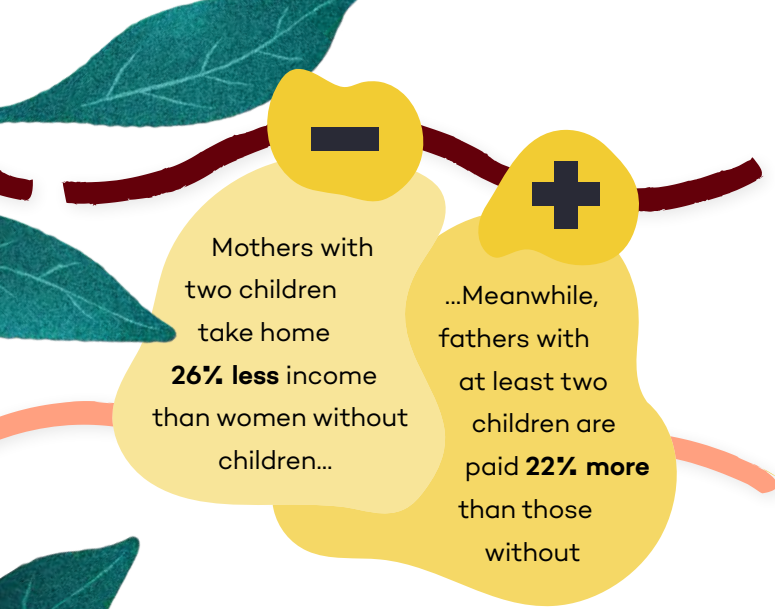
To understand more, we worked closely with the Fawcett Society to conduct substantial research, including: surveying **3,000** working parents with children aged four and under, **500** HR decision makers, and **1,254** working adults

across the UK. To establish a 360-degree view of the issues at play, we also ran a series of focus groups with both mothers and employers, allowing us build recommendations around the experiences of real working parents.

Our research reveals that **84%** of mothers face difficulties returning to work after maternity leave, with **30%** receiving no support from their employer during this time. Lower-earning mothers, and those who took longer maternity leave, are afforded the least support. As a result, **1 in 10** mothers (**11%**) never return to the role they left, and a fifth (**19%**) of those that do quickly consider leaving.

With UK employers wrangling with skills shortages and a push for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, we explore the key challenges and potential solutions that can make motherhood work for more working mothers. We also examine how these issues affect single, low-earning, and Black and minoritised mothers, recognising the unique and overlapping challenges they face.

Throughout this report we will provide actionable steps for employers to become more family-friendly, in order to improve retention, productivity, and the lives of their employees.



Data from [The Ethnicity Motherhood Penalty report](#), produced by the Fawcett Society

The growing presence of working mothers

Data from the [Office for National Statistics \(ONS\)](#) shows that in 2021, **76%** of mothers with dependent children were employed. This is a **15%** increase over the past two decades, and the highest level on record.

Nevertheless, due to caring responsibilities, women across the board are still **7 times more likely to be economically inactive than men**. In their 30s, the difference is even more striking, with **1 in 10** women aged 30-39 years old being out of the labour market, compared to just **1 in 100** men.

Within this, white mothers' employment rate is **5%** lower than that of childless white women, and mothers of Indian, Black African, and Chinese heritage face up to an **11% employment gap compared to childless women** of their own ethnicity.

With the adoption of remote and hybrid working, it has become **increasingly common for both working parents to be employed full-time**. This accounts for **60%** of families with one child, and **40%** of families with three or more children.

The cost of being a mother

Women currently occupy **69% of all low-paid and insecure jobs**, making them almost twice as likely to be in unstable employment compared to men. Meanwhile the value of maternity and parental pay has dwindled to just **47% of the national living wage**, with mothers on Statutory Maternity Pay receiving an average of just **£7,500** per year.

[Research by the Fawcett Society](#) shows that, on average, mothers with two children earn **26%** less than women without children, while fathers see their earnings rise. This inequality worsens over time, with a **10%** difference in hourly pay between mothers and fathers at birth, rising to nearly **30%** by the child's 20th birthday.



The childcare crisis: Affordability and access

Data from [The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development](#) reveals that childcare consumes a larger share of parents' earnings in the UK compared to any other country.

Accessibility is a factor too, with [government figures](#) showing that between 2019 and 2022, there were **9,800** fewer childcare workers in the UK. Consequently, some areas of the UK are seeing a reduction in available places for children, with [many local authorities growing increasingly concerned about their future capacity](#).

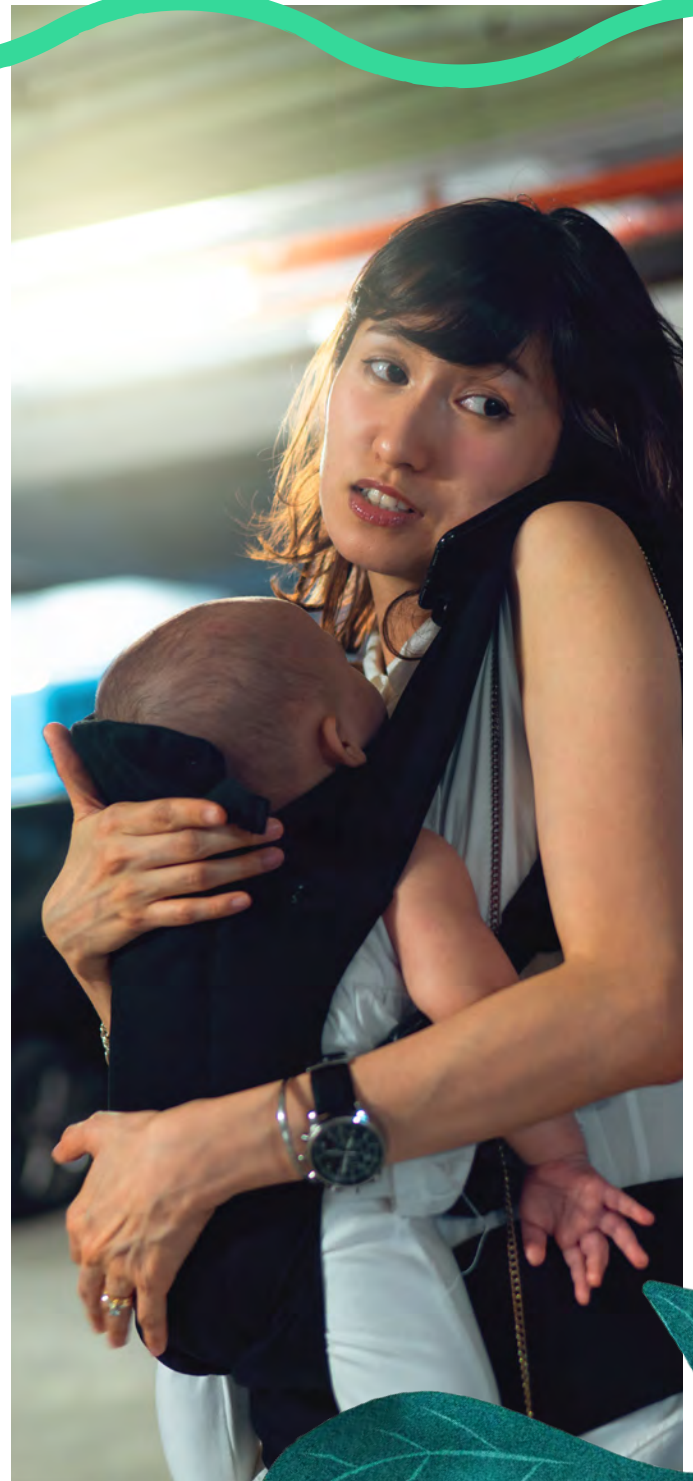
Government support isn't cutting it

The [UK government plans to increase the 'free hours entitlement' for parents](#). This is set to take effect in phases from April 2024, so that by 2025 all working parents of children over 9 months and under five will be entitled to 30 hours of free childcare, for 38 weeks per year.

The government also intends to raise hourly subsidy for childcare providers, but once inflation is taken into consideration, it is unclear whether the proposed funding will cover demand. [The Institute for Fiscal Studies](#) have indicated that getting these funding rates right will be crucial to ensuring that the plans are deliverable and maintain quality of care.

Employer support falling short

Although **85%** of businesses have dedicated support for employees returning from maternity leave, our research suggests that this help often fails to fully meet the needs of new mothers. While government policies need further attention, employers can take more steps to support new mothers as they return to work and navigate their childcare responsibilities.



Key findings

We surveyed **3,000 working parents** with at least one child four years old or under and found that...

31%

of mothers feel stuck in their current job due to the flexibility it provides, despite being able to earn more or advance further elsewhere

23%

of mothers avoid mentioning their childcare responsibilities in interviews for fear of looking less committed or capable

72%

of working mothers and **66%** of the general working population* view employers who offer family-friendly benefits more positively

44%

of mothers say they feel more ambitious after having a baby...

...but 79%

of mothers face barriers trying to advance their career

16%

of mothers have faced discrimination based on their status as a working mother, **rising to 22%** of single mothers

84%

of mothers face challenges returning to work after maternity leave

30%

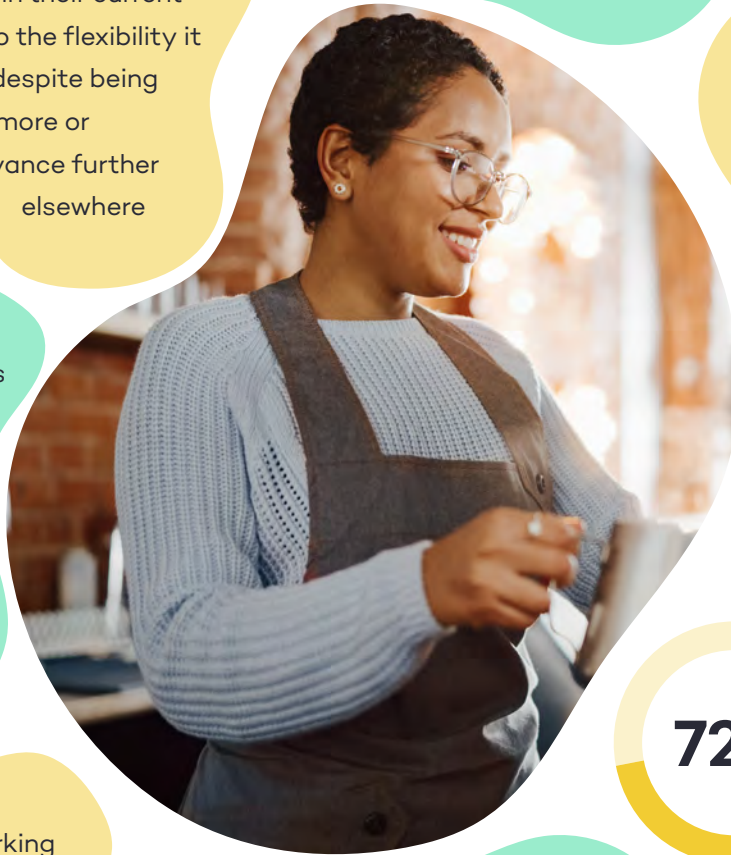
of mothers receive no support when returning to work

...rising to 38%

for those who took **13+ weeks** of maternity leave or earn less than **£20,000**

72%

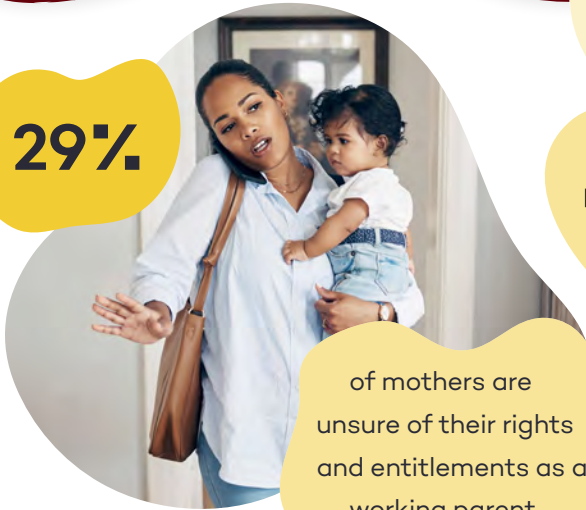
of parents have had to take unpaid leave due to their childcare responsibilities



*Data is from our general survey of 1,254 employed UK adults. Results have been weighted to the nationally representative criteria.

Key findings continued

29%



of mothers are unsure of their rights and entitlements as a working parent

27%

mothers say that a previous negative reaction from their boss has prevented them from asking for support again

27%

of mothers feel uncomfortable discussing the support they need with their boss...

...with 40%

worried that bringing it up will make them look uncommitted to their work

19%

of mothers have considered leaving their job due to a lack of support at work

...with 11%

handing in their notice

...but only 31%

have access to flexible working



Top 5 types of support working mothers want to see:

#1 Flexible work arrangements

39%

#2 Extended paid parental leave beyond the legally mandated period

33%

#3 Encouragement to take breaks and prioritise self-care

30%

#4 Regular check-ins to discuss progress and challenges

29%

#5 Training & development opportunities to help build new skills and knowledge

28%

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Barriers at the door: Returning after maternity leave

84%

of mothers experience challenges returning to work after having a baby, compared to 74% of men

Becoming a parent is a huge life change for any woman, and it's still relatively early in this journey that their newfound responsibilities abruptly collide with work demands.

On average, **new mothers take 39 weeks of maternity leave**. Most (89%) return to their previous employer following this period, but are immediately met with challenges to overcome.

As we explore these blockers in more depth, it is vital to debunk misconceptions and unhelpful assumptions around mothers and their career ambitions. It's worth noting that 76% of women's career aspirations remain the same after becoming mothers, but 34% worry that they will not be able to meet them due to their childcare commitments. 44% of mothers we surveyed describe themselves as more ambitious upon their return from maternity leave.

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My children are 19 months apart, and I felt huge guilt for leaving them so quickly. I never had support from my manager to feel it was okay that I had taken maternity."

Yasmin, mother of two children



Despite this drive, 34% of mothers report a loss of confidence when they return to work, rising to 42% for those who take over 26 weeks of leave. Of those whose confidence has been dented, 28% say this is because they did not receive sufficient training or guidance upon their return.

A recurring thread in our research is that mothers who take a longer maternity leave receive less support upon their return. Our findings reveal that 23% of women who took 13-25 weeks' leave received no support, rising to 42% of those who took 26-52 weeks' leave. This shows that despite having spent more time out of the business, and arguably needing greater support to reintegrate, these women are often left to fend for themselves.

Let's explore some of the challenges they face in more detail.

Balancing act: Navigating childcare and career

The cost and availability of childcare is challenging for any working parent. As women usually bear this responsibility, the challenge they face is even greater.

This originates from a misalignment in government policy, where women have the legal right to one year's maternity leave, but the most substantial financial support for childcare only becomes available the term after a child turns three. Lack of availability, and inflexibility of childcare options, compound this problem – particularly for lower-earning women and single mothers.

This policy is set to change in the coming years, but until then, returning mothers are balancing family commitments (**39%**) and high childcare costs (**35%**). They do this amid increased workloads (**17%**), with **15%** believing their roles weren't adequately covered during maternity leave.

As pressure grows, **14%** of working mothers feel they receive less recognition for their efforts, with **18%** being made to feel as if they aren't working hard enough. This impacts single mothers the most, with a quarter (**24%**) made to feel this way.

These factors contribute to the loss of confidence in a third of mothers (**34%**), hindering their potential growth and causing them to question their skills and abilities.

39%
of mothers

Vs.

27%
of fathers

struggle to balance work and childcare commitment when returning to the workplace



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It feels like a minute counting exercise when I need to pick up my child. It's quite frustrating to be honest, because there are days where I work longer hours, and no one takes account of those. But if I need 15 minutes to take my daughter to nursery and back, I have to account for those 15 minutes."

Sophie, mother of one child

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45% of mothers say they feel guilty trying to juggle work and childcare



A shrinking support network

15% of returning mothers frequently find themselves excluded from social and networking events, which can have adverse effects on their career progression and how they are perceived in the workplace.

41% of mothers say that this leaves them feeling detached from their colleagues. This is particularly true for single mothers, with a staggering **60%** feeling isolated at work. This hinders their reintegration into the workplace and prevents them from seizing potential opportunities that they would otherwise be able to.



Even things like socials and team outings, which are wonderful for team bonding... when you're a parent separated from your child, you want to get back because you feel that guilt."

Jamila, mother of one child

Shouldering stress and guilt

With a higher workload, dwindling support network, and limited career opportunities, it's no wonder that mothers feel the stress of striking a balance between their professional and personal lives.

There are also feelings of guilt and anxiety brought on by leaving their child. This is a concern expressed by **45%** of working mothers and rises to **58%** of those who took more than 26 weeks of maternity leave.

Making things more challenging, we found that a quarter (**24%**) of mothers feel that their manager is not supportive of their individual needs, and perhaps due to misconceptions or entrenched biases, this is most prominent among Asian women (**37%** compared to **23%** of white women).

For employers, beyond the benefits of offering mental health support at work, a compassionate management approach can play a vital role in alleviating some of these pressures. **30%** of returning mothers would appreciate being encouraged to take more regular breaks to prioritise their mental health, while a similar amount would value the chance for more regular check-ins with their manager to discuss progress and challenges (**29%**).



Stunted career progression

Despite remaining highly ambitious, **66%** of women feel their career development has suffered since becoming a mother. So much so, that research from the [Equality and Human Rights Commission](#) found that as many as **54,000** mothers lose their job each year due to maternity discrimination.

Meanwhile, **22%** of mothers see their job responsibilities reduce when returning from maternity leave. This is twice as high as that reported by returning fathers, and further undermines their career aspirations.

Women who take longer maternity leave are particularly affected, with **37%** of those who had 26 weeks off seeing their remit shrink. In some cases, mothers are even demoted, with **12%** of Asian mothers experiencing unrequested demotions, compared to **7%** of all women.

Government data sheds light on another challenge: [women with children under eight years old are more likely to be working in a part time role than a full-time job](#). A lot of mothers wish to reduce their hours when starting a family, but we must emphasise that for many, this isn't a choice. As many as **40%** of mothers tell us that they would prefer to increase their working hours if childcare was more affordable and accessible.

However, our research shows that half of returning mothers reduce their working hours. This trend increases with the length of maternity leave, with two-thirds of those taking over 26 weeks returning to fewer hours. Notably, single mothers are less likely to reduce their hours when returning from leave, most likely as a result of financial pressure.

Creating a culture which values output over presenteeism is key to realising the potential of working mothers, as it can open the door to part time workers thriving within their role.



I was offered a promotion after returning from maternity leave but turned the opportunity down. The role was one that I had done before and I knew I could deliver, but I was committed to working four days a week to spend the fifth day with my young children. Having already faced criticism from management colleagues about being unavailable for meetings on my non-working day, I felt that my working pattern was incompatible with a senior leadership position."

Rhoda, mother of two children

The post-maternity landscape: Support available to returning mothers

These experiences drive home the need for comprehensive support and equitable workplace policies for parents. But what support is currently being offered?

Alarming, **30%** of mothers receive no support during their transition back to work, compared to **22%** of fathers. This rises to **42%** for those with maternity leave exceeding 26 weeks. An ongoing theme throughout our research is that mothers generally receive less support than fathers, while it's further influenced by factors such as the length of maternity leave, their income, and their seniority.

For mothers who do receive support, this typically includes flexible work arrangements (**31%**), regular check-ins with management (**18%**), encouragement to take regular breaks (**16%**), mental health support and resource groups (**14%**), and training opportunities (**15%**).

However, these figures are lower than what HR leaders claim their organisations provide, suggesting that even with the right policies in place, there may be barriers to accessing support on the ground. We'll explore this in more detail later in the report.



30%

of mothers said they had no support transitioning back to work after maternity leave, rising to **38%** for those who took **13+ weeks**

Learn more

Find out how you can best support mothers preparing for, or returning from, maternity leave in our [Totaljobs employer guide](#).

Barriers to support: Fostering a family-friendly culture

Creating a family-friendly culture is crucial, as even with the right guidelines in place, pre-existing and harmful attitudes may counteract policies, creating an unsupportive culture and hindering a mother's successful return.

While most mothers (**69%**) feel supported by their managers, **27%** remain uncomfortable discussing their specific needs with their employer, fearing that they may appear less committed (**40%**) or less professional (**31%**) in doing so.

This comes as a quarter (**27%**) of mothers have faced negative reactions from bosses or colleagues, making them hesitant to ask for support again. Additionally, **29%** are unsure of their rights as working parents, rising to **35%** for those who have taken 26 to 52 weeks of maternity leave.

These points highlight the critical need for providing accessible resources for both new mothers, and their managers and teams, to ensure that family-friendly policies are not merely put on paper but are effectively implemented throughout the company.

OVER
1 in 4

women
felt uncomfortable
discussing their
parenting needs
with their supervisor

//

My manager made it easy for me. I had loads of one-to-one meetings in the lead up to me going back, and I went in for catch ups and met the team and even went for lunch with them. This made it really smooth sailing."

Gurpreet, mother of two children

Keep in Touch (KIT) Days

KIT days are designed to lay the foundations for a mother's return to the workplace before their leave comes to an end. While two-thirds (**66%**) of mothers find them beneficial, and despite them being a statutory entitlement, approximately **22%** of new mothers do not have access to any KIT days. This figure rises to a third of women earning lower incomes and those taking a longer maternity leave (26 to 52 weeks).



The employer's take

It's encouraging to see that providing greater support for new mothers is already a priority for many employers.

Currently, **85%** of businesses claim to have specific policies in place to support parents as they return to work. This includes flexible work arrangements (**35%**), mental health support (**27%**), regular check-ins with management, encouragement to take breaks, as well as training to build new skills (all at **25%**). Just **15%** of employers state that they currently have no policies in place.

This reiterates the disconnect between the support businesses think they provide, and what mothers believe is actually available to them, emphasising the need for increased awareness of the policies and cultures businesses are trying to create, and better access for working mothers to receive on-the-ground support.

Fortunately, change is on the horizon, with **83%** of businesses planning to implement additional support for parents over the next year. These initiatives include more flexible working arrangements to ease the transition back to work (**31%**), extended paid maternity leave (**26%**), gradual return-to-work programmes (**24%**), and offering childcare support during the transition period (**24%**).



It's important not to exclusively link flexibility to parents. We've got employees who may want to work flexibly from a mental health perspective or because they are a carer. The more we can move it away from being exclusively for parents or working mums, the more it will be destigmatised."

**Rebecca Lemoru, HR Business Partner,
Weber Shandwick**



The majority of our employees are now hybrid workers, and we have flexible start and end times which allow people to drop off or collect their children from school or nursery. Two years ago, it was a very different culture, where talking about your children at work wouldn't have been acceptable."

HR Professional, Retail industry

Tipping the scales: Juggling childcare with work

As highlighted in the first part of this report, there are challenges that can make the initial return to work from maternity leave a test of resilience. Regrettably, over time, many of these obstacles become more entrenched, with parents having to navigate the complexities of managing their time, finances, mental health, children's wellbeing, and their career aspirations.

**ONLY
1 in 3**

mothers have
access to the flexible work
they need

Lack of flexibility

As it stands, only a third (**31%**) of mothers have access to flexible working arrangements. Due to this, only half of mothers believe their employer is committed to promoting a healthy work-life balance.

This balance is not just a matter of convenience, but a lifeline for the mental health and wellbeing of many employees. It's especially pivotal in levelling the playing field for mothers who are often juggling their work with their caregiving responsibilities. It's also vital for employers to ensure they have access to the right skills and best talent.

By extension, an eye-opening **72%** of parents have had to take unpaid time off work due to their childcare responsibilities. This figure is significantly higher for mothers from single-parent households and from non-white backgrounds, which when combined with the financial pressures they already face, is a major concern. Flexible working arrangements can help smooth this transition and make time off less unpredictable and disruptive.



Finding the right job: Childcare limiting career opportunities

Flexibility remains a challenge when searching for new roles too, with **85%** of mothers and **81%** of fathers struggling to find jobs that accommodate their childcare needs.

During their job search, **3 in 10** mothers are unable to find flexible hours that meet their needs, while **16%** report experiencing bias during the selection process. As a result, **23%** of mothers avoid discussing their childcare responsibilities in interviews.

This leaves **31%** of mothers feeling trapped in their current positions due to the flexibility it provides, passing up better career prospects elsewhere.



It's really difficult coming into the office, because it feels like there are blockers. As well as trying to prove yourself and prove you can do the 30 hours, there's something looming over you all the time. So, my return has been quite difficult, and super stressful in those first few weeks."

Lois, mother of three children

Poor perceptions and biases

68%

of mothers feel their capabilities and contributions are sometimes undervalued or overlooked in the workplace, **rising to 75%** for low-earning mothers



A third of employers wrongly believe that pregnant women and mothers are less interested in career progression than their childless and male counterparts.

It's bias like this which prevents managers from seeking further opportunities for their staff with children to develop or get promoted, which means that mothers don't see the wage and career progression they might otherwise have expected after having children.

It comes as no surprise then, that two-thirds (**68%**) of mothers feel that their contributions are undervalued or overlooked in the workplace, rising to **75%** of mothers in lower earning jobs.

Financial pressure

85%

of parents have faced financial challenges from balancing childcare responsibilities

Given the sheer cost of childcare, **85%** of parents unfortunately struggle with the cost of actually having a job. Whether it's covering childcare expenses, managing household bills, or aspiring to save for the future of their family; parents face serious financial pressures.

This burden is particularly felt by mothers, who are **1.4 times more** likely to feel strained by childcare costs than fathers, **1.5 times more** likely to be stressed by household bills, and another **1.5 times more** likely to struggle with saving for future expenses.

It's disheartening that, considering these financial strains, **1 in 4** mothers with one child say they would like to have another child, but cannot afford to.



When I first returned to work after having my second child, my childcare costs exceeded my mortgage. Isn't that depressing?"

Kerry, mother of two children

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Hampered development

44%

of mothers say they feel more ambitious after having a baby...

BUT 79%

face barriers trying to advance their career



The lack of availability and unaffordability of childcare, along with a lack of workplace flexibility, are significant roadblocks to narrowing the gender pay gap.

As we've previously highlighted, **4 in 10** women, and particularly those from non-white backgrounds, are more ambitious after returning from maternity leave. However, despite their unwavering career ambitions, most working mothers (**79%**) hit a snag when attempting to advance their careers alongside their family commitments.

This is particularly seen in the **30%** of Black women who retain their aspirations but feel forced to delay them until their children are older. In doing so they are **1.4 times more** likely to put their career plans on hold, and limit their development, compared to the average mother from all ethnicities.

As a result, two-fifths (**41%**) of all mothers have had to decline promotions or career development opportunities that didn't align with their childcare arrangements.

This comes at a cost though, with **31%** of mothers feeling stuck in their current job, due to the flexibility it provides. That is wasting the potential and productivity of almost a third of new mothers, having a long-term impact on their career and the workforce as a whole.

Employers who invest in addressing these challenges are paving the way in unlocking the untapped potential of working mothers, benefiting both their workforce and the broader goal of gender equality in the workplace.

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If you're not in the company because you are on a period of leave, you do get overlooked for a promotion. I don't know that it's necessarily handled in the best way."

Elaine, mother of two children

The employer's take

Our research discovered that only a fifth (**21%**) of HR leaders recognise the importance of including family support measures within their gender equality policy.

That said, we found that **82%** of employers currently offer some type of support for childcare. The most common support on offer is: Flexible working arrangements (**42%**), onsite facilities for expressing breast milk (**24%**), subsidised childcare services (**23%**), referral services for childcare providers (**21%**) and on-site childcare facilities (**18%**).

However, the real challenge emerges during the implementation of these family-friendly policies, as highlighted by **76%** of HR leaders. Their struggles include a lack of management support for a flexible work culture (**25%**), limited local childcare availability (**25%**), budget constraints (**24%**), and difficulties accommodating flexible work arrangements (**23%**).

One contributing factor to this issue is the lack of training for managers, with only **31%** of businesses hosting mandatory training on childcare support, and **28%** providing specialised training for managing employees returning to work after parental leave.

Once more, this points to a disconnect between family-friendly policies and their practical application within the workplace, showing that despite good intentions, without the right buy-in or awareness, they often fall short.

3 in 4

of HR leaders have faced challenges when implementing policies to support with childcare

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Covid-19 really changed things for us, as senior leaders saw that changes to our policies reaped dividends in the loyalty and commitment that staff have given. So now we are just implementing changes because that's who we are as a business – it makes a better experience for our people and then they give us more. The difference it has made is huge."

Siobhan Spiro, Vice President of group reward, RS group

Family-friendly employers: How the right support benefits all

1 in 5

mothers
have considered
leaving their job due to
challenges around
parental support

2 in 3

UK workers
view employers who
offer family-friendly
benefits more
positively

The unnecessary loss of returning mothers from the workforce should be identified as a potential risk to any organisation, with stronger efforts made to retain them. By establishing a workplace that works for modern family life, we can create a work environment that benefits everyone.

While **82%** of employers plan to increase the support on offer, its effective roll out will be key to:

- Enhancing the wellbeing of all employees
- Improving staff retention rates
- Boosting productivity for the entire team
- Creating a more appealing workplace for new recruits

As for candidate attraction, it stands to reason that **91%** of working parents consider family-friendly practices pivotal when deciding whether to accept a job offer. But beyond this, our research indicates that **two-thirds** of all UK workers, regardless of parental status, find family-friendly employers appealing. This is because these policies demonstrate an organisation which promotes a positive work-life balance (**53%**), supports its staff (**51%**) and which has a positive workplace culture (**41%**).

In a talent-scarce market, where wellbeing and productivity levels are declining, these measures become even more vital to attract, retain, and empower a diverse and talented workforce.

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I don't know how I would have gone back to work if I didn't have a supportive manager. It's hard being a working mum, but in terms of the support I've had, I've been quite fortunate."

Jenayde, mother of one child

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Recommendations:

For championing new mothers at work

With so much at stake, we have worked with the Fawcett Society to outline some clear, actionable steps you can take to improve the experiences of mothers in your company – and benefit the entire organisation as a result.

Build a clear policy framework

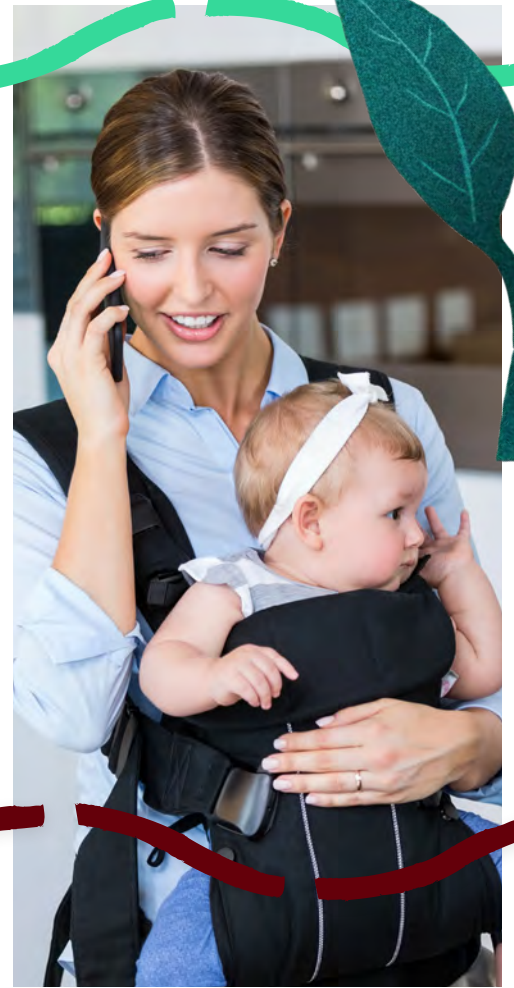
With **29%** of mothers unsure of their rights and the support on offer to them, a key first step for any employer is to establish a clear way of sharing your policies with management, parents and those hoping to become parents.

This framework facilitates productive conversations between managers and employees before parental leave begins. It should equip managers to:

- Agree a level of contact: Tailored to the employee's preference, allowing them to opt for occasional, regular, or essential updates during parental leave.
- Schedule Keep in Touch (KIT) days: This allows someone on parental leave to attend meetings, training, and social events with colleagues, to ease their transition back to work.
- Book a 'return to work' meeting: Schedule this in the diary for an employee's return. Use this time to cover: any updates the employee may have missed while away, their new situation and how you can best support them, and

agreed working patterns (which should be discussed in advance to ensure compatibility with childcare). Make sure to book in ongoing catch-ups for discussions around progress and challenges too.

- Provide guidance on flexible working: Let departing employees know how to make a flexible working request and the types of flexibility that they might want to consider, so you can alleviate concerns and build the foundation for a smooth re-entry to the workforce.
- Highlight the support available: Clearly signpost all available support resources, including coaching, access to parental networks, mental health assistance, and financial advice.



Use data to understand your organisation

It's also important to understand your workforce. You can use data to track the retention, training and promotion of individuals post maternity, paternity or parental leave. In this, you can consider the impact on your organisation's gender pay gap, talent pipeline, and the cost of replacing mothers who leave.

Analyse this data every six months to track the outcomes of mothers returning from maternity leave. Monitor their retention rates, promotion opportunities, and performance appraisal scores. This information will be key as you go forward.

Potential targets might include:

- Improvement in retention of parents
- Uptake of paternity leave
- Pay per hour of part time versus full time employees
- Recruitment and promotion of women into senior positions
- Number of people in senior roles with a flexible working arrangement



Foster a positive and inclusive workplace culture

Building a culture that understands the challenges parents face, values their contributions, and avoids assumptions about parenthood is crucial.

To achieve this, begin by educating all staff and management about the challenges faced by parents, along with your commitment to becoming a family-friendly employer. Ensure that working parents are aware of available support and that their requests for additional assistance will be heard.

Our research underlines how important the buy-in of staff, and particularly management, is for implementing family-friendly changes. Use research findings such as ours, to make a case for this support, emphasising the impact on retention, productivity, and candidate attraction. You may wish to spotlight your company's commitment to valuing output over presenteeism, and explicitly ask all employees to leave behind any assumptions about mothers in the past.

Highlight how supporting parents with the short-term challenges of young children has long term implications for retention, productivity and closing the gender pay gap.

This will help you create a culture that benefits employees and highlights the value of working parents, meaning you can showcase your company as a family-friendly employer within your recruitment.

Learn more

Discover how other leading businesses are putting their family-friendly policies into practice in our [employer case study](#), from Totaljobs.

Upskill your managers

For a greater chance of meaningful change, you should consider compulsory management training focused on supporting returning parents. Encourage open and honest conversations, providing managers with the consistent framework needed to truly hear their team member's views. Ensure managers are aware of immediate actions they can take, such as a flexibility within working hours, and clarify the HR support available to them to make any larger-scale changes.

Make it easy for managers to 'log' discussions so that HR can monitor whether all employees are given access to similar standards of support, helping you to spot shortcomings in certain areas, and safeguard people from marginalised backgrounds further.



Embed flexible work options

Flexible working is a top priority for returning parents, and it's vital to establish clear expectations for it to be implemented effectively.

In the lead-up to their return, have open conversations with employees to find work patterns that suit both of you. This could involve compressed hours, adjustments to start and end times, term-time work, or job sharing. Any 'core' requirements, such as time spent in the workplace should be communicated at this point, rather than once someone has returned. See to it that you are not making assumptions about what parents will want on their return, and be sure you are having the conversation with both fathers and mothers.

Where flexibility may not be needed long term; consider an informal, short term flexible working agreement. While these may not require HR involvement, they can be invaluable during the initial months of a parent's transition into managing both

childcare and work responsibilities. Documenting these agreements is advisable for consistency and safeguarding against any unforeseen management or team changes that could impact them.

Additionally, it provides a means to monitor equal access, assessing whether different groups are afforded the same opportunities.

You should also avoid using vague 'business needs' to reject flexible working requests. Instead, provide evidence and explore alternative working arrangements when requests are challenging to accommodate.

To transform the culture around flexible working and create roles with genuine progression paths, it's essential for all eligible employees, not just working mothers, to embrace it. Ensure equal access and monitor acceptance, ideally considering factors such as ethnicity, pay, and seniority.

Foster development opportunities

Make no assumptions on the wants, needs and ambitions of new parents. As we've seen many are more ambitious than ever, so be sure to continue offering them challenging assignments and recognise that you may need to give them a little extra encouragement to go for it.

On top of this, make sure that any training and networking events can be done within core business hours to keep them accessible to new parents.

Ensure that staff who are working part time are still allowed time for networking, training and other development opportunities, and that this isn't what is sacrificed to make their role flexible.

Support paternity and parental leave

Promote, educate, and encourage the uptake of paternity leave. Both in terms of statutory and longer paid shared parental leave. For larger organisations, consider improving the paternity offer beyond what is statutory. Celebrate the sharing of childcare responsibilities and take care not to reinforce stereotypes that suggest that caring for young children is a woman's responsibility.

Learn more

Read how you can support those preparing for, or returning from, paternity leave in our [Totaljobs employer guide](#).

Champion affordable childcare

Be a loud voice in your network, advocating for changes to childcare provisions from the UK government. With greater investment into the accessibility of childcare, all workers and employers stand to benefit.

Internally, speak openly with your management so that they understand the pressure that childcare brings. Work with them, and the parents in your organisation, to think about how you might alleviate these issues. This could mean meetings only take place within school hours, or flexibility around the days that employees are required to be in the office.

Be conscious that asking your employees for short term flexibility (e.g. last minute requests to swap to their non-working days, or those where they work from home) may not be possible or might incur significant costs or extra stress for them.



Government recommendations

While employers have a crucial role in supporting working parents, the key to unlocking the potential of mothers in the UK lies in enacting meaningful policy changes.

Government policies are vital in shaping the environment for working parents, and through these changes we can offer greater protections to working mothers — and drive real change in the realising of their ambitions in the workplace.



Recommended resources

[Are you happy to talk flexible working?](#)

– Working Families

[Toolkit for employers: Managing pregnancy, maternity and parental leave in the workplace](#)

– Maternity Action

[Employer focus on working parents](#)

– Chartered Institute of Personnel Development

We are calling on government to:

Adopt a flexible work policy that incorporates an advertising duty

- Require employers to advertise the flexible work options available to job applicants during the recruitment process. This would include the availability of hybrid working, compressed hours, part time working, or the availability for it to become a job share.
- This would change the default from job applicants requesting flexible working arrangements at interview, which may prejudice the application process, to a more productive conversation. This shift can mean that flexible working is normalised for everyone regardless of their parental status.

Make reforms to childcare

- Put measures in place to make childcare affordable, accessible, and high quality for all parents across the UK.
- To truly address this challenge, it is essential to integrate these measures into a broader workforce strategy that can both attract and retain valuable talent within the childcare sector. Without such a comprehensive approach, providers may continue to face closures, exacerbating the issue of high child-to-staff ratios and prompting more childcare workers to exit the sector.

Make reforms to parental leave

- Ensure maternity and paternity leave is paid at an affordable rate for parents to take leave, and that a period of at least 6 weeks is reserved exclusively for fathers and non-birthing partners.

Solutions to support your people strategy

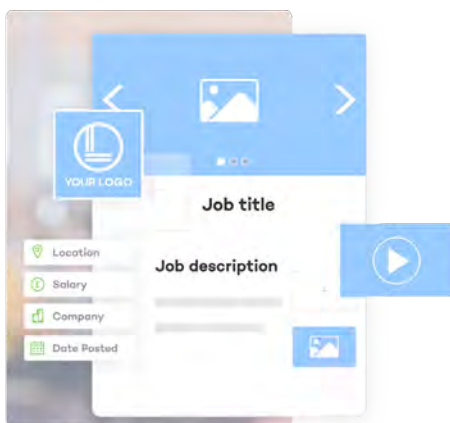
At Totaljobs we believe that everyone should be able to find and thrive in the right job. In a competitive job market, with many organisations losing talented women and parents from a lack of support, we're here to help you protect and grow your most precious resource; your people. Whether you need insights to build your business case for change, tools to reach talented parents in the job market, or ways to spotlight your workplace culture as it develops – we've got you covered.

Spotlight your family-friendly culture

With **2 in 3** of all jobseekers viewing employers with family-friendly benefits more favourably, elevate your commitment to a family-friendly culture and showcase what it's like you work at your organisation with a Premium Job Ad and Company Profile.

Premium Job Ad

Bring your job opportunities, culture and values to life with the inclusion of photos and videos in your advert. [Learn more.](#)



Company Profile

Create a dedicated page to highlight what it's like to work at your company, along with your values and commitments to building an inclusive workplace. [Learn more.](#)

Reach busy parents across the web

Reach talent on their terms and control your costs with the world's leading programmatic platform. Our team can help you design and target fully branded display banners to reach potential candidates searching for similar roles on other websites – receiving 3 times more clicks than the average industry banners. [Learn more.](#)

Build your employer brand from scratch

In a competitive job market, ensuring your brand stands out from the crowd is key. Working with branding experts Universum, we can help by developing your unique brand proposition to attract and engage the right candidates, fast. [Learn more.](#)



Final thoughts

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Jane Lorigan, Managing Director, Totaljobs:

While more mothers are part of the workforce than ever before, our research spotlights the significant barriers that arise the moment they return to work from maternity leave, and persist throughout their careers. Whether it's the delicate balancing act between childcare and work, missed opportunities for career progression, or biases entrenched within their teams.

It's clear from our research that flexible work arrangements and the creation of a supportive, family-friendly culture are indispensable for retaining, uplifting, and supporting this vital part of our workforce. Businesses must create an environment where all talent can flourish.

We were bowled over by the discovery that almost a third of mothers don't receive any support when they return to work. When set against the two-fifths of mothers who've become more ambitious since becoming parents, it's clear that the barriers to success are too high.

It's absolutely vital for companies dealing with skill shortages to focus their attention in this space. Doing so will enhance the retention, productivity, and recruitment of these highly skilled and ambitious mothers.

Furthermore, we join others in calling on the government to do more regarding childcare cost and accessibility, ensuring that this is considered not as a cost, but as a tangible investment to eradicating gender disparities in the workplace.

Totaljobs is proud to collaborate with the Fawcett Society to shed light on these issues and advance the dialogue on family-friendly workplace practices. Through this partnership, we aim to assist employers of all sizes in addressing these challenges and reaping the benefits of family-friendly practices, benefiting mothers, families, children, and employers alike."





Jemima Olchawski, CEO of the Fawcett Society:

The Fawcett Society believes in workplaces that work for all women, at every stage of our careers and lives. The few years that a mother spends looking after young children is a tiny proportion of her working life.

Too often, outdated prejudices and assumptions mean that women face unnecessary and harmful attitudes that hold them back. This results in many women stuck in roles that are below their capabilities

For business who are struggling to retain talent and combat ongoing skills shortages, the opportunity to develop promising careers that should never have stalled in the first place is an obvious step towards solving these issues.

This must change. Importantly, that support must go to women who are out of the workforce longest, particularly those who take over 26 weeks of maternity leave, as well as women who are low paid and are single parents. It isn't good enough to have supportive policies on paper, businesses need to make those a reality in the workplace and create genuinely family-friendly cultures.



It's clear that often it is Black and minoritised women and lone parents who are at the sharpest end of restrictive stereotypes, so a meaningful commitment to closing the gender pay gap and supporting returning mothers must consider the specific experiences of women from these groups.

The data clearly shows that flexible working is the most important demand from working parents. Only when we fully embrace companywide cultures of flexible working, will we see mothers have the best chance of being fully integrated into the workforce.

We call on businesses and government to prioritise ending the motherhood penalty by properly supporting women to balance their work and caring responsibilities. Right now, the UK simply cannot afford to let these talents go to waste."

Research methodology

Report insights came from a variety of sources to give us a 360-degree view of motherhood in the workplace, and to ensure our recommendations could be tailored to the real challenges faced by working parents and HR leaders. Sources included:

Online surveys

- A survey of **3,000 working parents** with children aged four and under, conducted in June 2023 (Respondents were recruited through online panels. Results have been weighted to be representative of working parents with children aged four and under. This was done by taking the proportions of a nationally representative UK sample (weighted to ONS criteria) that working parents with children under four represent, and using those to create a weight set to be representative of this group).
- A survey of **500 HR Decision Makers** from UK businesses, also conducted in June 2023.
- A survey of **1,254 UK adults in employment**, conducted in August 2023 and weighted to the nationally representative criteria.

Focus groups

- The Fawcett Society ran a focus group with 7 working mothers with at least one child under the age of four on 4 July 2023. They also facilitated a focus group with 8 HR and Diversity and Inclusion leaders, from different industries, on 6 July 2023.
- Totaljobs ran an additional focus group with 9 members of the Family Network (an employee resource group for parents) on 17 July 2023.

Totaljobs data

- The job ad data quoted alongside this report comes from OTT: an inhouse tool built by The Stepstone Group to look at job postings and all peripheral informal (like salaries, listed benefits, region, skills etc). Data was pulled in July 2023.

Third-party research and insight

- The wider research used to inform this report has been referenced and linked throughout.

Thank you to our collaborators

We are deeply grateful for the support of our collaborators whose insights and shared resources were invaluable to this report. We thank employees at Totaljobs who shared their experiences, the focus group participants, and the participants in the business round table for their insights and ideas.

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